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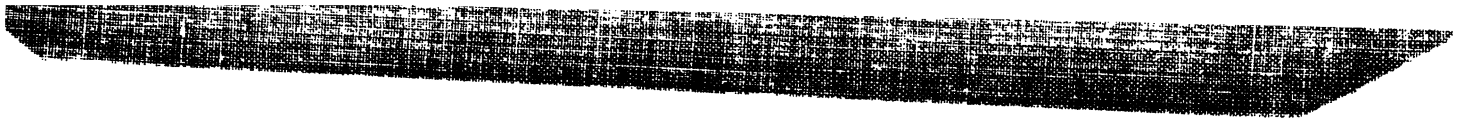

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THE VILLAGE and the LANDLORD

By EDWARD CARPENTER.

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THE VILLAGE AND THE LANDLORD.

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My object in this paper is simply to describe the economic conditions of a single country parish, here in England, and from the consideration of these conditions to draw some inferences towards our future policy with regard to the land. In modern life—in every department of it, one may say—bedrock facts are so veiled over by complex and adventitious growths that it is difficult to see the proper and original outline of any problem with which we are dealing; and so it certainly is in this matter of the land question. Anyone glancing at a country village, say in the neighborhood of London, probably sees a mass of villas, people hurrying to a railway station, motor cars, and so forth; but as to where the agricultural workers are, what they are doing, how they live, what their relations may be to the land and the land owners—these things are obscure, not easily seen, and difficult to get information about. And yet these are the things, one may say, which are most vital, most important.

The parish which I have in mind to describe is a rather large and straggling parish in a rural district, with a small population, some 500 souls, almost entirely agricultural in character, consisting of farmers, farm laborers, woodmen, and so forth, with a few miners and small artizans—on the whole a pretty hard-working, industrious lot. Fortunately, one may say, there is hardly anything resembling a villa in the whole parish; there is no resident squire, and the business man is conspicuous by his absence. The place therefore forms a good example for the study of the agricultural land question. The farms are not over large, being mostly between fifty and one hundred acres in extent. There is just the land, and the population living mainly by the cultivation of it. This population, as I have hinted, is not lacking in industry; it is fairly healthy and well grown; there is no severe poverty; and (probably owing to the absence of the parasite classes) it is better off than most of our agricultural populations. Yet it is poor, one may almost say very poor. Probably, of the hundred families in the parish, the *average* income is not much over £60 a year; and many, of course, can by no means reach even that standard.

Financial Conditions of the Village.

Let us consider some of the financial and other conditions which lead to this state of affairs. In the first place, I find that the inhabitants have to pay in actual rent to their landlords about £2,500 a year. In fact, the gross estimated rental of the parish is about £3,250, but as there are quite a few small freeholders the amount actually paid in rent is reduced to £2,500. Nearly the whole of this goes off out of the parish and never comes back again. The duke and most of the other landlords are absentees. This forms at once, as is obvious, a severe tax on the inhabitants. One way or another the hundred families out of what they produce from the land have to pay £2,500 a year into alien hands—or, averaging it, £25 per family! and this, if their average income is now only £60, is certainly a heavy burden; since, if they had not to pay this sum, their income might be £85. No doubt it will be said, "Here we see the advantage of having resident squires. The money would then return to the parish." But would it? Would it return to those who produced it? No; it would not. The spoliation of the toilers would only be disguised, not remedied. In fact, let us suppose (a quite ordinary case) that the parish in question were owned by a single resident squire, and that the £2,500 were paid to him in rent. That rent would only go to support a small extra population of servants and dependents in the place. One or two small shops might be opened; but to the farmer and farm worker no advantage would accrue. There might be a slightly increased sale of milk and eggs; but this again would be countervailed by many disadvantages. "Sport" over all the farm lands would become a chronic nuisance; the standard and cost of living, dress, etc., would be raised; and the feeble and idiotic life of the "gentry," combined with their efforts to patronize and intimidate, would go far to corrupt the population generally. In this parish then, of which I am speaking, the people may be truly thankful that they have not any resident squires. All the same, the tax of £25 per family is levied upon them to support such squires in some place or other, and is a permanent burden upon their lives.

Enclosure of the Commons.

Less than a hundred years ago there were in this parish extensive common lands. In fact, of the 4,600 acres of which the parish consists, 2,650, or considerably more than half, were commons. They were chiefly moors and woods; but were, needless to say, very valuable to cottagers and small farmers. Here was pasture for horses, cows, sheep, pigs, geese; here in the woods was firewood to be got, and bracken for bedding; on the moors, rabbits, bilberries, turf for fuel, etc. In 1820 these commons were enclosed; and this is another thing that has helped to cripple the lives of the inhabitants. As is well known, during all that period systematic enclosure of the common lands of Great Britain was going on. In a landlord House of Parliament it was easy enough to get bills passed. Any stick will do to beat a dog with; and it was easy to say that

these lands, being common lands, were not so well cultivated as they might be, and that *therefore* the existing landlords ought to share them up. The logic might not be very convincing, but it served its purpose. The landlords appropriated the common lands; and during the 120 years from 1760 to 1880, *ten millions of acres* in Great Britain were thus enclosed.*

In 1820 the turn of this particular parish came, and its 2,650 acres of commons "went in." I used to know an old man of the locality who remembered when they "went in." He used to speak of the occurrence as one might speak of a sinister and fatal event of nature—a landslide or an earthquake. There was no idea that it could have been prevented. The commons simply went in! The country folk witnessed the proceeding with dismay; but, terrorized by their landlords, and with no voice in Parliament, they were helpless.

It may be interesting to see some of the details of the operation. In the Enclosure Award Book, still kept in the parish, there remains a full account. The Duke of Rutland, as lord of the manor, as impropriator for tithes, as proprietor, and so forth, got the lion's share, nearly 2,000 acres. The remaining 650 acres went to the other landlords. Certain manorial and tithe rights were remitted as a kind of compensation, and the thing was done. In the Award Book the duke's share is given as follows:—

	Acres.	Roods.
1. "As Impropriator for tithes of corn, grain, and hay; and in lieu of and full compensation for all manner of tithes, both great and small"	1381	3
2. "As Lord of the Manor," and in compensation for certain manorial rights, "and for his consent to the said enclosure" ...	108	2
3. "For chief rents," amounting in the whole to £14	28	2
4. "For enfranchisement of copyholds" ...	11	3
5. "As proprietor"	18	2
6. "By sale to defray the expenses of the Act"	449	1
	1998	1

Thus we find, in exchange for the ducal tithes, nearly a third of the whole area of the parish handed over—most of it certainly not the best lands, but lands having considerable value as woods and moors. We find some acres adjudged to the duke in consideration of his kind "consent" to the transaction. And, most wonderful of all, nearly 450 acres surrendered by the parish to defray the expenses of getting the Act through Parliament! And now to-day in the said parish there is not a little field or corner left—absolutely not a solitary acre out of all the vast domain which was once for the people's use—on which the village boys can play their game of cricket! Indeed, most valuable tracts were enclosed quite in the

* See Mulhall's *Dictionary of Statistics*, "Enclosures."

centre of the village itself—as, for instance, a piece which is still called "The Common," though it is no longer common, and many bits on which little cottages had been erected by quite small folk. It would be a very desirable thing that the enclosure award books in other parishes should be investigated, and the corresponding facts with regard to the ancient commons brought to light generally over the country.*

Incidence of the Rates.

A third thing which cripples the agricultural interest very considerably is the incidence of the rates. The farmer's dread of a rise in rates has become almost proverbial. And it is by no means unnatural or unreasonable. For there is probably no class whose estimated rental is so large, compared with their actual net income, as the farmer class. A farmer whose farm, after deducting all expenses of rent, rates, manure, wages, etc., yields him a clear profit of no more than £100 a year for his household use is quite probably paying £70 a year in rent. But a superior artizan or small professional man who is making £150 a year will very likely be only paying £20 in rent. It is obvious that any slight increase in the rates will fall much more heavily on the first man than on the second. The rates, therefore, are a serious matter to the farmer; and something in the way of shifting their incidence, and distributing the burden more fairly, ought certainly to be done.†

As an instance of this latter point, let me again refer to the parish in question. We have seen that some 2,600 acres of common lands passed over to the landlords in 1820, ostensibly for the public advantage and benefit. Of these, more than 1,500 acres of moor land, held by the duke, are rated on an estimated rental of less than 2s. 6d. per acre. The general farm lands of the parish are rated on an estimated rental of 14s. or 15s. per acre on the average. Thus the moor lands are assessed at about one-sixth of the value of the farm lands. This is perhaps excessively low; but the matter might pass, if it were not for a somewhat strange fact—namely, that a few years ago when some twenty acres of these very moor lands were wanted for a matter of great public advantage and benefit, that is, for the formation of a reservoir, the ducal estate could not part with them under £50 an acre; and a little later, when an extension of acreage was required, the district council had to pay a much higher price, so that the total purchase, first and last, comes out at more than £150 per acre! Now here is something very seriously out of joint. Either the moor lands are worth a capital value of £150 an acre, in which case they ought to be assessed at, say £5, instead of at 2s. 6d.; or else, if the rating at 2s. 6d. is really just and fair,

* *Some Forgotten Facts in the History of Sheffield and District* (Independent Press, Sheffield, 1907, price 2s. 6d.) contains valuable information of this kind.

† I am not here discussing the question of how far a rise of rates falls upon the landlord; for, though this may ultimately and in the far distance be so, it is clear that the farmer primarily feels the pinch, and not till he is nearly ruined is there any chance of his getting a corresponding abatement of rent.

surely it is monstrous that the public, having to carry through a most important and necessary improvement, should be "held up" and made to pay a ruinous price, simply because the land cannot be obtained elsewhere. The conclusion is: Let such lands be rated in accordance with the capital value set upon them by their owners, and we shall have a much fairer and more equitable distribution of the public burden.

The Nuisance of "Sport."

And this matter of the moors leads to the consideration of a fourth cause which cripples the land cultivator terribly in this country. I mean Sport. The nuisance and detriment that this is to the farmer has become so great that, unless strict measures are soon taken, widespread ruin will ensue. In many subtle ways this acts. With the enormous growth of wealthy and luxurious classes during the last fifty years, the tendency has been to turn the country districts into a mere playground. The very meaning of the word sport has changed. The careful working of covers by the occasional sportsman has been replaced by clumsy battues, with wild shouts and shrieks of "drivers," and huge slaughter of birds, half tame, and specially bred for the purpose. Mobs of people, anxious to appear fashionable, and rigged out by their tailors in befitting costume, are formed into shooting parties. Rich men, wanting to get into society, hire moors and woods, regardless of expense, regardless of animal slaughter, regardless of agricultural interests, as long as they get an opportunity to invite their friends.* In Devonshire to-day the farms in many parts are simply eaten up by rabbits, because the landlords, in order to provide plenty of shooting, insist on spinneys and copses and hedgerows and waste bits being retained in their wild state for purposes of cover! On the northern moors the rabbits similarly devastate the farms along the moor edges—not because the rabbits are preserved, for the shooting is mainly of grouse and pheasants, but because the moors, being uncared for except in this way, the rabbits are allowed to multiply without check. They are the gamekeeper's perquisite. Yet if the farmer who has a farm adjoining the moor carries a gun to protect himself against their invasions, it is conveyed to him (if a tenant of the same landlord) that he had better not do so, lest he should be suspected of shooting the grouse! Thus he is paralysed from his own defence. In the parish of which I am speaking there are lands along the moor edges which used to grow oats and other crops, but which now, on account of the rabbit nuisance, are quite uncultivable in that way, and only yield the barest pasture.

* The financing of these affairs is funny. A large moor will let for the grouse season for £3,000, say on the condition of grouse being bagged up to, but not beyond, 2,400 brace. Mid-week parties hurry in by rail and motor, stay for two or, perhaps, three nights, and hurry off again, to be succeeded by other parties the following weeks. The whole thing is conducted in the most mechanical way, with "drives," "batteries," and so forth. And when the expenses are added up, including men employed, guests entertained, and rent paid, they certainly do not fall far short of the proverbial guinea a bird!

Fifty Years of Agricultural Decay.

In and about 1850, when wheat more than once reached £5 a quarter, the farmers and landlords were doing a roaring trade. Rents were high, but the land could afford it. Farmers were anxious to increase the size of their holdings, and landlords were not averse to this, as it saved them trouble. And so set in that tendency to roll small holdings into big ones which continued, with baneful effect, during all the second half of the century. Sport at the same time came in to increase the action. It was easier to pacify the few than the many over that matter. It was simpler to hunt a pack of hounds over two or three large farms than across a network of small holdings. Besides, the New Rich, as well as the elder gentry, wanted widespread parks, and not a democratic rabble of cottagers at their very doors. And so the game went on. Soon prices of farmstuff fell heavily. But it is easier to get rents up than to get them down again. The alleviations of rent which *have* taken place since 1854 have been only painfully gained and grudgingly yielded. Wheat which was at 100 shillings a quarter then has been the last few years at about 30 shillings! And though other farmstuffs have not fallen in like degree, yet during all that period of declining prices, the British farmer has been pinched and pined all over the country. The landlord has been on top of him; and with holdings often much too large for his need, and a yearly balance too small, he has employed far less labor and tillage than he ought to have done; his land has lost heart; and he has lost heart—till he has become to-day probably the least enterprising and least up-to-date of all the agriculturists of Western Europe.*

Such are some at least of the causes which have contributed to the decay of agriculture in this country; and their consideration may indicate the directions in which to seek for a cure.

Security of Tenure Needed.

What is needed, first and foremost, is very obviously security of tenure, under such conditions as shall give both farmer and cottager a powerful interest in the land and its improvement. It is often said, and supposed, that the countryman now-a-days does not care about the land and the rural life, and is longing to exchange it for town life. I do not find this so. I find that he is compelled into town life by the hard conditions which prevail in the country—but not that he *wants* to leave the latter. Indeed, I am amazed at the tenacity with which he clings to the land, despite the long hours and the heavy toil; nor can one witness without wonder and admiration the really genuine interest which he feels in its proper treatment, quite apart from any advantage or disadvantage to himself. It is common to find a farm laborer expressing satisfaction or disgust at the good or bad tillage of a field with which he is in no way connected; or to see a small farmer's son working early and late, perhaps up to the age of thirty, with no wages but a mere pittance

* There are many farms of 500 or 600 acres in Gloucestershire only employing five or six hands—or one man to a hundred acres!

in the way of pocket-money, and only a remote prospect of inheriting at some future date his share of the farm-stock and savings, and yet taking a whole-hearted interest in the work not really different from that which an artist may feel. There is some splendid material here—in these classes neglected by the nation, and overlaid by a tawdry and cheap-jack civilization.

I say it is clear that they must be given a secure and liberal tenure of the land and be free once for all from the caprice of the private landlord with his insolences of political intimidation and sport, and his overbearance in parochial affairs. The absolute speechlessness of our rural workers to-day on all matters of public interest is clearly, to any one who knows them, due to their mortal dread lest their words should reach the powers above. It has become an ingrained habit. And it has led of course to a real paralysis of their thinking capacity and their enterprise. But place these men in a position where the fruits of their toil will be secure, where improvements can be made, in cottage or farm, with a sense of ownership, and where their vote and voice in the councils of the parish will not be dependent on squire or parson; and the world will be astonished at the result.

Public Ownership.

There are two main directions in which to go in the matter of secure tenure. One is the creation of more small freeholds; the other is the throwing of lands into the hands of public authorities, and the creation of permanent tenures under them. Though the latter embodies the best general principle, I do not think that forms a reason for ruling out freeholds *altogether*. In all these matters variety is better than uniformity; and a certain number of freeholds would probably be desirable. In the same way with regard to public ownership, if anything like nationalization of the land is effected, I think it should decidedly be on the same principle of variety—creating not only State and municipal ownership, but ownership by county councils, district councils, parish councils, etc.—with a leaning perhaps towards the more *local* authorities, because the needs of particular lands and the folk occupying them are likely on the whole to be better understood and allowed for in the locality than from a distance.

Let us suppose, in the parish which I have taken for my text, that by some kind of political miracle, all the lands on which rents are now being paid to absent landlords were transferred to the ownership of the Parish Council. Then at once the latter body would come into an income of £2,500 a year. At one blow the whole burden of the rates would fall off, and still a large balance be left for public works and improvements of all kinds. It might be allowable, for a moment, to draw a picture of the utopian conditions which would ensue—the rates all paid, the rents milder and more equal than before, the wages of parish workers raised, free meals for school-children provided, capital available for public buildings, free libraries, agricultural engines and machinery, also for improving or administer-

ing common lands and woods, and so forth. There is no danger of course of so delirious an embarrassment actually occurring! for any scheme of nationalization would take a long time, and would only gradually culminate; and no scheme would place the whole lands of a parish at the disposal of a single body like the parish council. But the example helps us to realize the situation. Every farmer and cottager whose holding was under a public body would know and feel that whatever rent he might have to pay, it would come back to him in public advantages, in the ordaining of which he would have a voice; he would know that he would be in no danger of disturbance as long as he paid his rent; and in the matter of capital improvements in land or building he might either make them himself (with the council's consent), in which case if he should decide later on to quit the holding, the council would compensate him, knowing that the rental paid by the new tenant would be correspondingly increased; or he could get the council (if willing) to make the improvement, and himself pay a correspondingly increased rent for it. In either case he would have as good a bargain, and almost as free a hand, as if he were on his own freehold.

Small Holdings.

Security of tenure, largely through public ownership, must certainly be one of the first items of a land-reform program. Another item, the importance of which is now being widely felt, is the making provision for the effective supply of small holdings. Whether the present Small Holdings and Allotments Act (of 1907) *will* prove effective or not remains to be seen. But something effective in that direction must clearly be done. By small holdings I mean holdings, freehold or leasehold, from twenty-five acres down to one or two acres in extent, each with cottage and buildings attached.* Of this class of holding (largely owing to the "rolling up" policy of last century) there is an absolute famine in the land. The demand, the outcry, for them is great, but the supply is most scanty. Yet this class covers some of the most important work of modern agriculture, and a great variety of such work. It includes, in its smaller sizes, market gardens, with intensive culture of all kinds, and glass, besides the kind of holding occupied by the professional man or other worker who supplements his income by some small cultivation; and in its larger sizes it includes nurseries, as well as small arable and pasture farms. The starvation that exists to-day in Britain of all these classes of industry is a serious matter.†

* The Act of 1907 defines a "small holding" as exceeding one acre and not exceeding fifty acres.

† It will be said that if there is such a demand for small holdings, the supply will soon by natural laws be forthcoming. But as a matter of fact under our present system this is not so—and for three reasons: (1) The slowness of the landed classes to perceive the needs of the day—even though to their own interest; (2) The want of capital among a great number of them, which makes them unwilling to face the breaking up of large farms and the building of extra cottages; (3) The fact that those who have money are careless about public needs, and do not *want* to see a sturdy population of small holders about their doors.

In the parish with which we are dealing, owing partly to its distance from a market, the demand for such holdings takes chiefly the form of a demand for small arable and pasture farms. But the need of these is great, as indeed it is nearly all over the country. A holding of this kind, of any size from five to twenty acres, forms an excellent stepping-stone for a farm laborer or farmer's son towards a position of independence. A second or third son of a farmer, not likely to follow his father in the occupation of the farm, has to-day only a poor prospect. Unable to command enough capital to stock a large farm himself, and unable to find a small one, he has but two alternatives—to drift down into the fruitless life of the farm laborer, or else to go off and try his luck in town. If, as is most often the case, he is twenty-five or so before the need of making a decision comes upon him, his chances of learning a town trade are closed, and the first alternative is all that is left. Yet the small holder of this kind is often one of the most effective and useful types of agricultural worker. On a holding, say of fifteen acres, while he cannot get an adequate living for himself and family by ordinary farm methods, yet he can gain a considerable amount, which he supplements by working as a useful hand for neighbors at harvest and other times. Being thrown on his resources, and not having *too* much land, he gains more than the average out of it, and his own ingenuities and capacities are developed ; so that, as a rule, he is the most resourceful and capable type of man in the district. It is of the most vital importance to the country that this type of man, and his class of holding, should be encouraged.

Agricultural Co-operation.

There is one method which I have so far neglected to mention by which both security of tenure and small holdings can be obtained —I mean Co-operation. The formation of co-operative societies for the purchase of large farms, for the division of them, the building of cottages, and the leasing of small holdings so obtained, is one of the most hopeful directions for the future. It ought to be easy for the public authorities to lend money on perfectly safe terms for this purpose. What co-operation has done and is doing for agriculture in other countries—in the way of establishing banks, land-holding societies, societies for butter-making, egg-collecting, buying of feeding stuffs and manures, sale of produce, etc., is now perfectly well known. Ireland even has left England behind in this matter ; but England and Scotland will have to level up. It is a sign, at least of good intentions, that the late Act gives power to the County Councils to promote and assist the formation and working of co-operative agricultural societies of all kinds.

Re-transfer of Old Common Lands and Declaration of Land Values.

One of the very first things, I think, which ought to be taken up is this question of the commons. If ten million acres between 1760 and 1880 passed so easily from the public use into the exclusive

hands of the land owners, surely there ought not to be much difficulty in passing them back again. As I have said, they were appropriated mainly on the plea that, being commons, they were inadequately cultivated. The main cultivation they have received from the landlords has been of rabbits, grouse, and other game! The public has been simply played with in the matter; and agricultural interests, instead of being extended and improved, have been severely damaged. When we realize, in addition to this, that, owing to the increase of the general population and its needs, these tracts which passed into private hands with such slender compensation to the public, are now held up at ruinous prices, we realize that it is high time that the game should cease; and that the lands which Parliament voted away from the public in those days should now be voted back again—and with "compensation" on a similar scale. These lands are still largely in the hands of the families to whom they were awarded; and the transfer could perhaps be most fairly and reasonably effected by their simple reversion to the public on the expiration of existing life interests in them. But of course there would have to be land courts to deal with and compensate special cases, as where the land had changed hands, and so forth.

The value of such ancient common lands to the public would now be very great. Large portions of them would be suitable for cultivation and for allocation in small holdings; the villages would again have a chance of public playgrounds and cricket grounds; the Parish councils would have lands (so much needed and so difficult to obtain) for allotment gardens; the District councils might turn many an old woodland into a public park; while the wilder moors and mountains could be held under County councils or the State, either for afforestation, or as reserves for the enjoyment of the public, and the preservation of certain classes of wild animals and birds, now in danger of extinction.

Let a large measure of this kind be passed retransferring the main portion of the common lands into public hands; and at the same time a measure compelling owners in the future to declare their land values, and giving power to the public bodies to purchase on the basis of the values so declared; and already we should have made two important steps towards bringing the land of the nation into the possession of its rightful owners.

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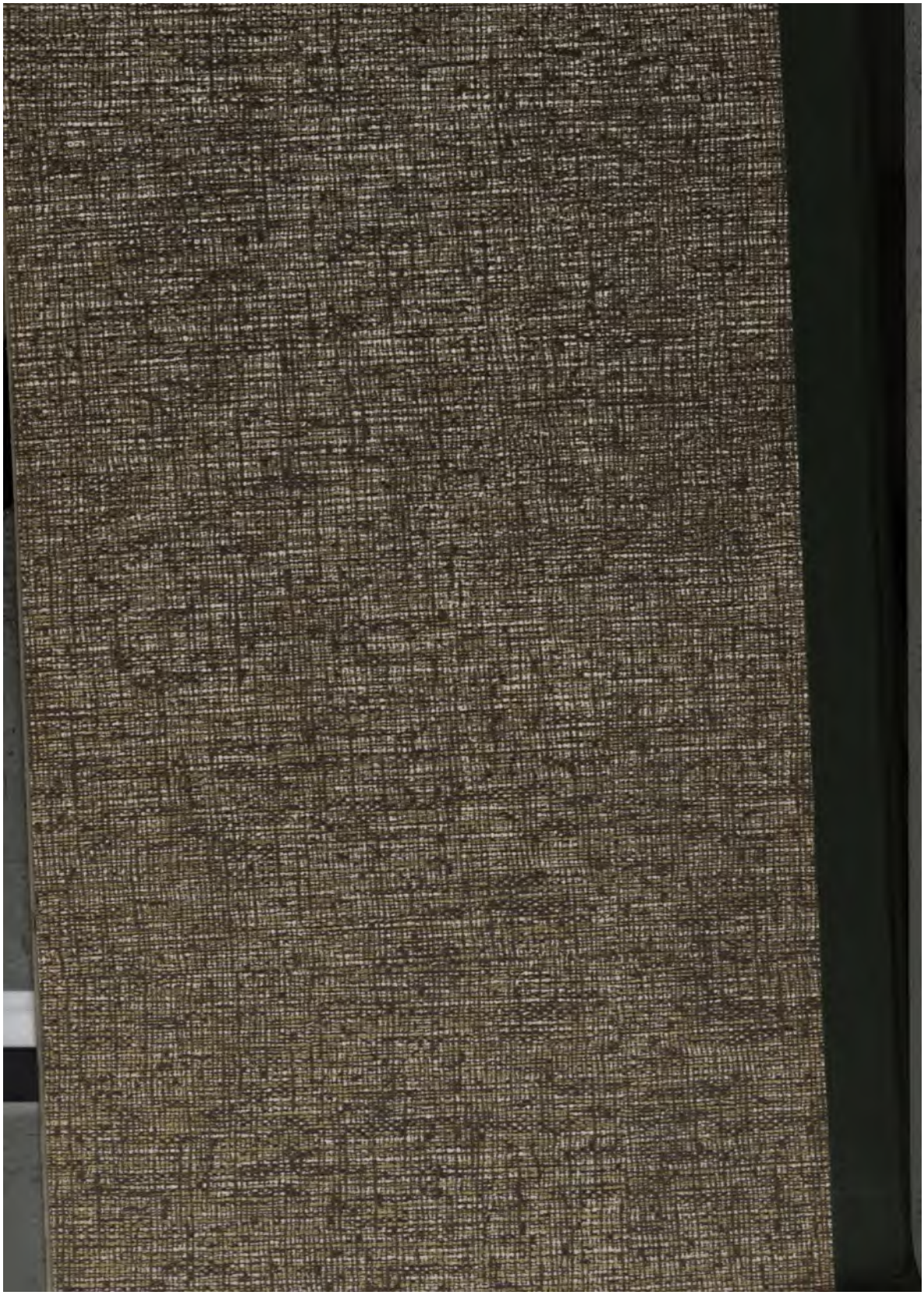
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